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ABSTRACT

Since the vast majority of conflict situations arise from a breakdown in the communication process, where one individual misunderstands something generated by another, the crucial challenge for leaders lies in avoiding misunderstandings. Leaders must remember, when formulating all sorts of correspondence, that when a "sender" forms a message and channels this information to a "receiver," communication breakdowns occur either through mistakenly encoding and decoding information or through language barriers and cultural differences. Further, leaders must be conscious that written communication lacks the non-verbal cues used in oral communication to refine and interpret the meaning of the message. When the written word is "decoded" in a way different from its intent, the breakdown often results in an emotional response, conflict, and wasted time. In the case of writing memoranda, the first consideration should be the purpose of the communication and if the purpose could be served better though a telephone call or visit. Next, administrators should consider the memo's intended audience to further define the need for written communication. Finally, writers must pay close attention to the voice they adopt to prevent misinterpretations of the memo's tone. (MAB)

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DELIVERING THE "WRITE" MESSAGE:

THE MEMO AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Bill H. Lamb has served as the Director of the Writing, Literature and Media Communications program at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas since 1987. Prior to that appointment, he was both an English faculty member and Humanities Department Chair at Coffeyville Community College. He received his doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Kansas State University, his master's degree in English literature from Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas, and his bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of Kansas. His most recent publications have focused on instruction methods, assessment, and evaluation. He is a Kansas Association of Teachers of English board member and holds an office in the local Phi Delta Kappa chapter. Since moving to Overland Park, he has been actively involved in a variety of community organizations and youth support groups.

In 1993, the National Community College Chair Academy selected Dr. Lamb as the Midwest Region Award Winner for Encouraging Teaching Excellence. That same year he completed a year-long professional certification program through the Institute for Academic Leadership Development sponsored by the NCCCA. In 1994 and 1995, Dr. Lamb co-facilitated a regional institute for the NCCCA in New York and Toronto and was a presenter at the Kansas City institute.

Marilyn D. Rhinehart is Assistant Dean of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. Prior to assuming that position, she served as special assistant to the president in development of a college strategic plan and as division head for the Social Sciences Division at North Harris College in Houston, Texas. She also received both teacher excellence and college writing awards. She holds bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees in American history from the University of Houston and is the author of *A Way of Work and A Way of Life: Coal Mining in Thurber, Texas, 1888-1926*. She has co-authored a test item file and participated in a video development project for two newly-published college history texts.

In 1993, she completed a year-long professional certification program through the Institute for Academic Leadership Development sponsored by the National Community College Chair Academy and co-facilitated a regional Institute for the NCCCA at Guam Community College in 1994 and 1995 and in Wisconsin in 1995.

James M. Still is Chair of the Division of Lifelong Wellness at Delta College in Michigan. Prior to assuming the role of chair, the college awarded him the rank of Professor in the division. Throughout his career at Delta College, he has been active in college governance activities and has held a number of leadership positions, including Senate President, Chair of the Teaching Faculty, and President of the college's chapter of the American Association of University Professors. He also directed two tax referendum campaigns for the college. He received his doctorate in college and university administration at Michigan State University in 1995, focusing his work on the impact of training on community college chairs' leadership behavior.

Dr. Still is a 1993 graduate of the Institute for Academic Leadership Development established by the National Community Chair Academy and was selected to serve as an Institute facilitator at Gum Community College in 1994 and 1995.

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Delivering the "Write" Message: The Importance of Effective Written Memo Communication as a Vehicle for Maintaining Good Faculty/Staff Morale

The vast majority of conflict situations arise out of a breakdown in the communication process where for a multitude of reasons one person misunderstands or misreads something generated by another person (person being a generic reference for individuals or groups of individuals). We have all experienced this feeling of loss or confusion, and the standard: "that's not what I meant at all; that's not what I meant" is a common frustration natural to all human beings in societies. In a growing, fast-paced, technological society where communication is constant and understanding crucial to success, this challenge to avoid such misunderstandings becomes even more critical and a fundamental challenge to those in leadership positions, especially those involved in middle management positions at community colleges and universities where diverse faculties and real life applications are a daily leadership responsibility.

We know from basic communication research that interpersonal communication breaks down for a variety of reasons but can be simply contributed to the concept of "noise"--both internal and external. As a point of review, when a "sender" forms a message and channels this information to a "receiver," communication breakdowns occur either internally--one miscodes or mistakenly decodes the information--or externally--language barriers, culture differences, and so forth. In oral communication situations, we rely heavily on non-verbal cues to refine and interpret the meaning of the message, but in written communication, we do not have this support. Our understanding of the message purpose and content is centered around the written word, and

when "decoded" differently from the intent, the breakdown will often result in an emotional response and/or conflict, and quite simply, a waste of valuable time.

Considering the amount of written correspondence you send and receive on a daily basis, as a transformational leader, are you ever misunderstood? Do you receive messages that stir your emotions rather than your critical thinking processes? Our purpose in this presentation is to review some common sense leadership issues relevant to written correspondence and to apply these principles to the consideration of case study examples. In so doing, our goal is to seek ways to incorporate strategies that will help us as leaders to avoid the misunderstandings, and when they do occur, we can consider methodologies that quickly reduce the stress and conflict.

We all send and receive memos on a regular basis, and many times the memo is written out of a need to communicate information quickly, sometimes even out of desperation. To help clarify this, let's consider a brief memo example.

> To: Roger McWherter, instructor
> From: Dr. Carl Kent, Department Chair
> Subject: Unnecessary Interruptions
>
> Roger, I want you to understand that I value you as a colleague, but you must stop coming into my office without an appointment to talk about personal and trivial matters. I have a number of reports due soon, and I simply need uninterrupted time. My job is very complex and I hope you can keep more to your office and do your work; I'll then have time to do mine.
>
> If you really need to talk to me about something related to work, then set an appointment and we can talk about it. I'll give you appointments for no more than fifteen minutes at one sitting. This will help to keep you organized and to the point, saving us both time.
>
> I value your teaching and service to the department, Roger, and I hope you have a nice weekend.

How many times have you been busy, interrupted by an instructor, and really felt like writing this memo? Maybe you have written this memo. Is the chair being vindictive? Unreasonable? No, we think not. If you look closely at the content of the message, the motivation is obviously time, and the response is not to insult the faculty member but to clarify the fact that the chair does not have time to effectively accomplish his tasks. The faculty member obviously thinks the drop-in visits are fine, and for the chair to use a "power" memo to address a personal matter causes the situation to become an issue. Consider the memo response from the faculty member.

> To: Dr. Kent
> From: Roger McWherter
> Subject: Interruptions
>
> No one on this campus takes their work more seriously than I do. To not discuss issues and problems with my immediate supervisor, at his request, is perfectly fine with me. As has been my experience in the past, he does not care what faculty think anyway. I know the department agrees with me.
>
> cc: Faculty Association President and Dean Michael Murray

In this example, is the faculty member overreacting to the chair's memo? What is the real issue? Time and unscheduled interruptions caused the chair to react in a nonpersonal, cold manner. An issue that could have been avoided by a simple verbal explanation, turns into a conflict situation, one that will cost far more time to repair than it should have taken to resolve.

The problem occurred when the chair felt pressured enough to write a quick memo, and in the process of writing, the chair did not consider the purpose, audience, or written voice which caused the memo to be impersonal and ineffective. The first consideration in any memo writing situation is purpose. Why do I need to put this issue in writing? Can I take care of this issue with a phone call or personal visit? Do I need written documentation for future reference? These

are just a few of the purpose questions to consider before you sit down at the word processor and compose a memo. If the purpose is clear and needs to be addressed in writing, then audience becomes important.

When considering who will receive the memo, you should consider the audience both generally and specifically. Do you want this record for others to read? By putting the information in writing, will it be received more effectively by the reader or readers? What will the audience expected reaction be? What would your reaction be if you received this memo from someone? These questions help to clarify the language as you edit the memo as well as addressing the need for the written correspondence.

The third area, voice, is the most important to consider because you must remember that the words you select and the order of presentation create your voice in the memo, and whereas in a personal situation, you can influence what the audience hears through vocal inflection, facial expressions, and body gestures, in writing the words must account for these factors. The reader can not see your intent at humor or sarcasm and may quickly turn a kidding comment into a grievance procedure. To find the voice, you must carefully and objectively read the memo before sending it, and when in doubt, let the memo sit on the desk for a day or ask a colleague to give you feedback on the wording. A quick response to a simple situation, as was seen in the example above, can just as quickly turn into a conflict blown well out of proportion to the context of the situation.

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This interactive conference session will ask for both individual and small group reactions to a variety of situations which call for written responses, and through this dialogue and group discussion, significant issues to consider when faced with memo situations will be considered. As is the case with the memo battle started by Dr. Kent, we all learn quickly from our experiences and through interactions and consideration of real life examples, our applications to these situations can be immeasurably improved.

The focus on the audience, purpose, and voice is historically proven as the basis for rhetorical communication, and by the use of some simple and practical tips, leaders can learn to avoid the pitfalls of hasty correspondence and can find ways to enhance their team building initiative through careful and accurate planning.